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ABSTRACT

This overview of an English course, "Writing for Government, Business, and Industry" (listed as English 339 at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota), emphasizes the essential elements of audience and voice. Composition theorists' assertion that the absence of voice is symptomatic of a profound developmental deficit (suggesting an inability to navigate successfully the avenues of modern organizational culture) supports this paper's argument for using the classroom memo and committee minutes to facilitate students' development of an organizational writing voice and a sense of audience. A sample memo is attached. (SAM)

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Session B-14:
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THE ORGANIZATIONAL VOICE

English 339, Writing for Government, Business, and Industry, is St. Cloud State's embodiment of a course that exists, in different forms, on a lot of campuses. Viewed strictly in that sense, it's the standard, generic Business-Writing or Tech-Writing course. And the syllabus for the course wouldn't surprise anyone who's been teaching a course in organizational writing: a series of letters, a unit on employment communication, and a substantial problem-based project. But people who have been around courses in organizational writing, especially those who have been around for some years, know how radically this course can change from one time and place to another.

A lot depends on context. And that's a large part of why we're here together. At the last university where I taught, the course was called Scientific and Technical Writing. Some of its aficionados called it Sky Teck. Some of its instructors called it boring. so did most of their students. The English Department called it unworthy of credit for an English major. I called it the best kept secret in the English Department.

At St. Cloud State, the secret's out. Students uniformly see the course as interesting, challenging, and useful. And those of us who teach it uniformly agree with this assessment. Furthermore, we see the course as rhetorically rich and theoretically interesting; and we see it as an integral element in a set of rhetorically rich and theoretically interesting and pedagogically powerful courses. In a conversation some time ago, my colleague David Sebberson characterized the course as a place where many students, for the first time in their academic careers, encounter the notion of audience in a way that is fruitfully problematical for them. This is especially true of their work on the employment communications--the resume and the letter to a prospective employer.

This problem of audience is a vital element in the course. Another is the problem of voice. For some, the whole notion of voice may seem antithetical to a course in organizational communication. And the title of my paper, "The Organizational Voice," may seem to be flirting with oxymoron. Is it even legitimate to yoke a Romantic term like voice with a course that is, frankly, vocationally oriented? Yes. It is.

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I think the problematical character of organizational voice and audience are precisely what make this course so interesting and so fruitful. It's because of the powerful presence of the external elements and constraints of organization and audience that voice becomes vitally important. In a sense, then, these elements really do call forth the writer's voice.

You may have noticed that I committed a pun about a paragraph back. I couldn't resist using the term "vocationally oriented" to describe this course, suggesting that, etymologically, voice is a profoundly legitimate presence in Writing for Business, Government, and Industry. When one responds to a vocation--a calling--one necessarily calls back.

Beyond etymology, there are still other grounds for arguing for the presence of voice in a course in organizational writing. Time is short, but I want to point to a couple of different lines of scholarly work that suggest its legitimacy. The first is the kind of work being done by Carol Gilligan and her colleagues and by Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues. The voice metaphor is central to Gilligan's positing of alternative moral frameworks for viewing and evaluating the world in her pioneering work, In a Different Voice, and what she calls "the hypothesis of a different voice" continues to inform her subsequent work in Mapping the Moral Domain. In the work of Belenky and her colleagues, building on the developmental theory of William Perry, the absence of voice is symptomatic of a profound developmental deficit, suggesting an inability to navigate successfully the avenues of modern organizational culture.

A second line of work, represented by A.O. Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, complements the work of Gilligan, Belenky, and their colleagues, by moving from a psychologist's focus on the individual to an economist's focus on the organization. Hirschman argues that while "exit" represents the quintessentially American resolution of a problem (exemplified by switching brands, switching schools, or switching jobs), "voice" (exemplified by letters to the legislature, consumer advocacy, complaints to the boss, etc.) often is a more effective form of resolution of problems. Furthermore, Hirschman points out, the exercise of voice, which is often seen as a symptom of lack of loyalty, is exactly the opposite. The person with an absence of commitment will find it easier simply to exit, but the person with a commitment to the organization will more likely find it appropriate to exercise the "voice" option.

How can one encourage the exercise of the organizational voice? Here's one example: the classroom memo. As my memo on memos points out, we as members of the class already are members of a large governmental bureaucracy--a state university. We can nurture our own growth as individuals and the creative and humane improvement of our drawer in the bureaucracy--perhaps even the organization as a whole--by exercising our voice regularly in the memos. The memos can further serve as a scaffolding for other texts that negotiate the individual and corporate needs and voices: letters to prospective employers, resumes, letters and position papers to university officials and other public officials about problems of concern to the class.

Here's a second example of a genre that nurtures the exercise of the

organizational voice: committee minutes. In fact, on an organizational level, minutes serve almost exactly the same function that the memo serves at the individual level. And while both, at first glance, appear humdrum, routine, perhaps pro forma, both constitute, in a sense, the ultimate embodiment of Writing Across the Curriculum. Both are instruments for defining and managing oneself and one's projects at both the corporate and the individual level. Committees who keep good minutes, like individuals who make good, thoughtful use of the memo, write themselves into the other genres--letters, resumes, reports--and, thereby, into the organizational worlds they inhabit.

ENGLISH 339 MEMO

Date: March 15, 1993

From: Bob Inkster

To: Members of English 339

Subject: WHAT TO DO WITH THE MEMOS

Following the schedule in the syllabus, I would like you to write me a series of memoranda that discuss your work and your thinking in English 339.

Purpose, Audience, Content?

We should treat these memos as we would if we were in a business or government organization. In fact, we are in a government organization, and one that to a large extent lives by the memo, so we don't have to pretend. I am the interested supervisor who wants you to do well personally and professionally in this organization. Therefore, I am interested in both your problems and your triumphs. I want to know what you're thinking/working on and how it's going. I also want to hear any ideas and suggestions you have about this class: people and other resources we should all know about, things you'd like more help on, etc.

In particular, you should use the memo to comment on the work you have just completed or that you have in progress: reactions, critiques, analyses, jeremiads, etc., on what you have just written or just read. The memos thus become a vital way of guiding our learning together, identifying good questions and exploring good answers.

Format, Length?

Use the same format I'm using here. Unless you have an awful lot on your mind, these memos should be a page maximum. On the other hand, they should be more than just a cursory "Hello, I'm here." They should reflect your sober thinking about what you're doing in this class.

Why Do I What to Do These Memos?

First, I need the feedback from you to help make this an effective course and me an effective teacher. Each person in this class is a resource who has something to offer. The memos are one way of making that offering. Second, I want to help you nurture the habit of sharing ownership and responsibility in the agenda of a group where there are organizational constraints such as grades, assignments, deadlines, and other people's schedules, as well as stylistic constraints such as the format requirements that I've imposed for these memos. The challenge is to speak and write in such a way that you satisfy both the organizational constraints and your own needs as a student and writer--that you prosper as a productive member of the group without giving up your personal integrity or voice.